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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001554

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND NEA STAFF ASSISTANTS; NSC FOR  
ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PATRIARCH SFEIR ON PRESIDENTIAL NAMES

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

**¶1.** (S) In a brief one-on-one conversation with the Ambassador about upcoming presidential elections, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir ventured into the "name game." Nassib Lahoud is the best candidate, and Boutros Harb is "very good." But, as March 8 will not accept them, they, like Michel Aoun (unacceptable to March 14), must be tossed out of the race. The Patriarch mused about (unexciting) technocratic-type candidates, including Demianos Kattar, Shakib Qortbawi, Joseph Torbey, and Simon Karam. Given the proximity of Robert Ghanem's hometown to Syria (suggesting Ghanem would be politically subject to Syrian pressure), the Patriarch also ruled out someone who seems to be an up-and-coming compromise choice. End summary.

**¶2.** (S) At the end of a 10/4 meeting (to be covered septel), the Ambassador asked to see Maronite Patriarch Sfeir one-on-one. The Ambassador explained that the USG wanted to make sure that he was comfortable with our policy regarding Lebanon's upcoming presidential elections: that the elections be conducted freely and fairly according to Lebanon's constitution and that there be no foreign interference in the process. The Ambassador noted that we are not advocating any candidates but will back any credible candidate chosen by the majority of MPs.

NASSIB LAHOUD: THE BEST,  
BUT "THEY" WON'T ACCEPT HIM

**¶3.** (S) The Patriarch expressed approval for the U.S. approach and then repeated his now-standard line about how the president can't come from either the March 8 or March 14 blocs but rather be acceptable to all. The Ambassador, noting that the Patriarch's criteria eliminated March 14's candidates (Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb) and March 8's Michel Aoun, asked whether the Patriarch saw Aoun and Nassib Lahoud as equivalent. The Patriarch laughed. No, he said, Nassib Lahoud is "excellent, the best," and Boutros Harb is "very good." (The unstated implication was that Michel Aoun was neither excellent nor very good.)

¶4. (S) Unfortunately, unless "the other side" agrees to accept Lahoud or Harb, they can't be elected except via a confrontation that "must be avoided." The Ambassador asked why Lebanon shouldn't have the best candidate; couldn't the Patriarch help see that Lebanon gets the best president possible? "They" won't except Lahoud or Harb, the Patriarch shrugged. "What can I do?" The Ambassador asked whether the Patriarch thought Harb's hope that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri might back him was realistic. "Let's hope," the Patriarch responded, in a voice indicating a lack of hope.

PATRIARCH CONSIDERS TECHNOCRAT PROFILE

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¶5. (S) The Patriarch, venturing without prompting more deeply into the name game, asked whether the Ambassador knew Shakib Qortbawi. Only vaguely, the Ambassador said. (Qortbawi, a lawyer, was previously head of the Bar Association. He ran in 2005 as a candidate on Michel Aoun's parliamentary list in Baabda-Aley, losing to Jumblatt's list.) Someone like Qortbawi, former Ambassador to the U.S. Simon Karam, former Minister of Finance Demianos Kattar, or Maronite League chairman Joseph Torbey would be acceptable, neutral choices, the Patriarch noted. The Ambassador asked whether any of them would be strong enough to rally the Christians around the presidency, given that Aoun will try to claim victimhood to rebuild his popular base, should any of those four be elected. The Patriarch said that he did not know, but "someone" like those four has the only chance of winning support from both March 8 and March 14 blocs. Someone like those candidates can help Lebanon escape the dangers of vacuum and chaos.

NIXING ROBERT GHANEM

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¶5. (S) The Ambassador noted that some say that MP Robert BEIRUT 00001554 002.2 OF 002

Ghanem might be a good compromise candidate. The Patriarch responded "no." Ghanem's West Biqa' town is "too close to Damascus," the Patriarch said, suggesting that the physical closeness may result in political closeness as well. Ghanem is a fine MP, but he would not be a good president. Noting that he was late for his lunch, the Patriarch ended the meeting.

COMMENT

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¶6. (S) The Patriarch's list of candidates is, at best, dismally banal, or, at worst, perverse. Demianos Kattar, for example, was Minister of Finance under Najib Mikati's cabinet, put there by Lebanon's pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud, to whom Kattar remains close. Mikati, once (and perhaps still) no slouch himself in the category of panderers par excellence to Syria, despaired at Kattar's lack of backbone and independence. Qortbawi (who once was and maybe remains an Aounie), Torbey, and Karam are bland. Moreover, Karam is uncharacteristically vocal when it comes to criticizing Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Hizballah: if the Patriarch thinks that Berri would block Nassib Lahoud, he must realize that opposition to Karam would be even stronger.

¶7. (S) In the context of his favored list, the Patriarch's apparent veto on Robert Ghanem is curious: while we aren't excited by Ghanem, either, he seems preferable to a couple, if not all, of the examples cited by the Patriarch as having the profile he seeks. If our suspicions are correct that Saad Hariri has for now zeroed in on Ghanem as a potential consensus fall-back to the March 14 candidates of Harb and Nassib Lahoud, Hariri faces a tough battle with the Maronite community: the Patriarch, Samir Geagea, and Michel Aoun all oppose Ghanem (as does Walid Jumblatt). Ghanem would be severely handicapped as a president if he begins his term

with the Christians stacked against him and the perception (a correct one) that he is in office only because of a deal between the Sunnis and Shia.

¶ 8. (S) As for the Patriarch's oft-repeated question of "what can I do?", we realize that he is fearful of the erosion of authority that would occur should he give explicit instructions that are (as in the Metn election) readily ignored. But there is one thing he could do: he could stop receiving visitors who openly defy his wishes, in order to impose some palpable penalties on those who reject his requests. For example, he was visibly annoyed at Hizballah's swift rejection of this month's Maronite Bishops' statement requesting the removal of the sit-in that puts downtown Beirut under constant siege. We suggested to the Patriarch that he simply stop receiving any visitors from those political groups that defied the bishops' wishes and maintained their sit-in tents. We do not expect he will follow our advice, however, and we expect to see Aounist and Hizballah delegations continue to pay frequent calls on the Patriarch.

FELTMAN